

Fish & Wildlife Service—National Conservation Training Center
Conservation and Community Public Lecture Series
Speaking with Jonathan Vanballenberghe

Speakers:

Mark Madison

Jonathan Vanballenberghe

[audio start]

Mark: Hi. Today's November 6th, 2009, and we're at the 7th Annual American Conservation Film Festival at the National Conservation Training Center. And we have one of our filmmakers with us this morning. We have Jonathan VanBallenberghe, who made a wonderful film called *In the Company of Moose*. We screened for the first time last night and we're going to screen two more times this weekend. So Jonathan, welcome to the podcast.

Jonathan: Thanks for having me.

Mark: It's great to have you here. Why don't you give us a little synopsis of your film?

Jonathan: Okay. Well, *In the Company of Moose*, is a film based on... The title is based on my subject's book, called, *In the Company of Moose*, with a book of photographs and essays. The subject happens to be my father, Vick VanBallenberghe, who for the last 30 years has been tracking and studying moose in Denali National Park in Alaska.

Mark: And how did you come to this subject?

Jonathan: Well, I had good access to the subject himself. But for me, moose are really iconic figures that seem to symbolize the wilderness and wildness of Alaska. And I thought that by making a film about the moose I would be able to go into some details about Alaska that are interesting to me as well. For example, the kind of human-animal interactions that are happening daily in Alaska. Moose being out on the highways. Moose going into the cities. Moose eating people's gardens, that kind of thing. Moose hunters. So really if you look at a moose, you can look at Alaskan culture.

Mark: Great. What was the most interesting thing you learned about moose?

Jonathan: Many interesting things. One is that one of the favorite foods of moose are bananas. And I learned that at the Alaska Big Game Conservation Center where a lot of filmmakers go and they are all told that if you want a

moose to do something, just wave a banana in front of it. I didn't feed the moose bananas, but I did watch them gobble them up. With the peel on and everything.

Mark: Oh my God! So we shouldn't reintroduce moose to the Honduras, or anyplace where bananas are ubiquitous?

Actually, this is one of our favorite films on the selection committee. We all really enjoyed it, and we're showing it three times out here. But near the end of the film, you made a fairly profound observation about a connection between field biologists and documentary filmmakers. Do you want to tell us a little bit about that? Something they share in common that might not occur to most of us.

Jonathan: Sure, well I make that point in my narration when I'm relating what I do, making documentary films, and what my father does, wildlife biology research at close range. Observational field tactic. And I just say that a documentary filmmaker needs to, or in my opinion, needs to film his or her subject while being a kind of fly on the wall, as they say. Meaning, our presence as documentary filmmaker hopefully shouldn't affect the behavior too much of our subject. And my father's research is the same, in that, his presence, if he wants to get good data as to how moose live and spend their time, he shouldn't be influencing their behavior too much. We both need to be accepted by the subjects enough to observe them in their natural, daily activity. That's all.

Mark: Very thoughtful point. It's a wonderful movie. Great imagery of moose. Some of the best I've ever seen. If people wanted to see the film, or purchase the film, where might they have that opportunity?

Jonathan: Well, they can learn how to do that at my website, www.OpenLensProductions.com. The film is being represented by a Canadian distribution company called OctoPix, and they could also learn how to buy it or see it through them, OctoPix.com.

Mark: Are there any other film festivals where it's going to screen?

Jonathan: Yeah. This was the first screening, at your film festival. The next one, next month in December, is going to be at the Alaska International Film Festival. I believe December 8th through the 15th. And a lot of different kinds of film there.

Mark: In Anchorage?

Jonathan: In Anchorage, Alaska, yeah.

Mark: Great. Well the name of the film is *In the Company of Moose*. It's a great film. Highly recommend it. And Jonathan, thank you for your time.

Jonathan: Thank you.

[audio end]